



CALL CENTER MANAGEMENT Review®

Strategies & Solutions for Call Center Professionals Worldwide

Call Center Recruiting and Hiring Practices Report



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2007 Call Center Recruiting and Hiring Practices Study Results

Even with all of the rapid advances in call center technology, and all of the mature, robust tools that help to power a center’s success, a skilled and inspired front line of agents is still the reigning “killer app” in customer contact.

High-touch will always supersede high-tech when it comes to ensuring lasting customer satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, having solid agent recruiting and hiring practices in place is critical. Talented and engaged agents don’t just come knocking on a call center’s door; centers must continuously strive to attract qualified staff, and use effective applicant screening and assessment methods to help identify the potential top performers.

To uncover how today’s contact centers are actually tackling the recruiting and hiring challenge, ICMI conducted a thorough survey in November 2006. In all, 256 call center professionals representing a wide array of industries and center sizes participated in the survey — sharing how they attract potential agent stars to their center, how they quickly weed out the wannabes, and how they determine if those who show promise truly are a good fit in the fast-paced and challenging call center environment.

The following are the key findings from the survey:

Participants’ Background

- The top five industries represented in the study include:
 1. Financial services (20.3%)
 2. Telecommunications (7.8%)
 3. Medical Healthcare (6.6%)
 4. Retail (5.1%)
 5. Manufacturing (4.7%) and Utilities (4.7%) (tie)
- The vast majority (86%) of respondents work in North American contact centers, with the largest representation coming from the Midwest U.S. (21.1%), the Southeast U.S. (13.7%), the Southwest U.S. (12.9%), and the Northeast U.S. (12.9%). Several respondents (7.4%) work in Canadian centers, and a handful of respondents work in contact centers in Mexico,

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South/Central America, Europe, Asia, Australia/Pacific Rim, the Middle East, and Africa.

Recruiting Practices

• The five most common agent recruiting methods that respondents cited using “very often” or “often” are:

1. Employee referrals (84.8%)
2. Online recruiting via own corporate Web site (73%)
3. Help wanted ads in local/regional newspaper/magazine (68%)
4. Online recruiting via third-party Web sites, such as Careerbuilders.com, Monster.com, etc. (58.2%)
5. Employment/temp agencies (48.4%)

Other common recruiting methods cited include general job fairs (39.8%) and campus recruitment activities (36.3%). Somewhat surprisingly, only 3.9% of respondents indicated that their center used their IVR system to announce job openings.

• Nearly two in three respondents (64.8%) reported rewarding existing staff whenever they make a successful agent candidate referral. The most common reward — by far — is cash (97%). Some centers also provide the referring employee with merchandise, gift certificates and/or event tickets (7.2%), and a few other centers (2.4%) use paid time off as a reward. A couple of respondents reported offering a prime parking spot for a week/month to agents who make successful employee referrals. Only one respondent in the entire study indicated using preferred schedules as a reward for job referrals.

• The majority (58.2%) of centers surveyed said that they create ideal agent “profiles” (based on their best agents’ skills/attributes) to help determine the key characteristics to highlight in recruiting and to test for during assessments. Three out of four (77%) of these centers seek input from existing frontline staff to help determine the key characteristics of successful agents and create useful profiles. (To read more about factors impacting call center agent success profiles, see page 4.)

Tracking Recruiting Effectiveness

• Of some concern is the fact that only 41.4% of centers surveyed formally track how successful their recruitment methods are (i.e., which one most often led to the hiring of a solid-performing, long-lasting agent.) Considering the costs involved in recruiting — and the amount of time that may be wasted in screening/assessing poorly qualified candidates — centers would be wise to evaluate the effectiveness of each recruiting method and determine which are worth the money and effort.

• Centers that do measure recruiting success use a variety of methods to do so, including:

1. Tracking agent retention by tenure (57.7%)
2. Tracking the number of qualified applicants received per recruiting method (56.7%)
3. Tracking agent performance after initial training and on-boarding period (55.7%)
4. Tracking agent performance during initial training (47.4%)
5. Tracking number of applicants received per recruiting method (44.3%)

• Centers that measure recruiting success were asked which single recruiting method is the most effective. The results:

1. Employee referrals (33.7%)
2. Online recruiting via third-party Web site (16.3%)
3. Online recruiting via own corporate Web site (14.3%)
4. Help wanted ads in local/regional newspaper/magazine (12.2%)
5. Employment/temp agencies (10.2%) and general job fairs (10.2%) (tie)

Top Labor Pools

• Respondents were asked what specific labor pools their center actively taps as part of its recruiting efforts. The top five labor pools cited include:

1. Recent college graduates (37.9%)
2. College students (36.6%)
3. Gen Xers (34.5%)
4. Gen Yers (32.3%)
5. Mature workers (24.7%)

(For more information about recruiting for various age groups, see page 8.)

Call centers could do much to improve their recruiting/hiring tactics by focusing more on the mature worker (individuals aged 55 to 70-plus) labor pool. The mature workforce — in addition to having a reputation for being loyal/responsible and for caring about customers — is one of the largest and fastest growing labor pools in the United States. Nevertheless, many companies continue to overlook this labor pool, mainly due to common negative stereotypes and myths about older workers

Centers are also missing out on a prime opportunity to bolster their front lines with committed and qualified staff by not actively recruiting individuals with disabilities — only 9.4% of respondents reported targeting this highly underemployed yet viable labor pool. As Kelly Egan, president of HirePotential (a consulting firm that helps organizations integrate individuals with disabilities), says, “These individuals are qualified, eager and largely untouched by traditional recruiting efforts.”

Contact centers should tap individuals with disabilities not just because it’s the socially responsible thing to do, but because it’s the smart thing to do from a business perspective — according to studies by organizations like the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), such workers are as productive as any other employee, often with better attendance records and loyalty (retention), since it’s so difficult for a disabled individual to find gainful and rewarding employment.

- Only 6.2% of centers surveyed allow new-hires to work from home. However, more centers may soon follow suit after hearing the following: Among centers that enable new agents to telework, 73.3% indicate that the home-agent option has significantly or somewhat improved the center’s ability to attract higher caliber agents than before.

Prescreening Tools and Methods

- By far, the two most common prescreening tools centers use to weed out unfit agent candidates early in the assessment process are: 1) resume/cover letter evaluations (87.7%); and 2) live phone screenings (75.9%). Surprisingly, only 7.2% of respondents indicated using recorded (IVR) phone screenings — a practice that can save those in charge of assessments/hiring a lot of time and effort, especially if they

invest in IVR-based screening tools that automatically eliminate the weakest candidates and highlight those who appear to have the most potential. The survey participants aren’t doing the best job of prescreening for successful e-support agents, either; only 16.4% of respondents said that their centers evaluate candidates’ writing skills via email early in the hiring process, and only 2.1% conduct text-chat screenings.

- Interestingly, the most-used prescreening method (resume/cover letter evaluations) is also the least effective, according to respondents (only 12.4% cited it as the “most effective/efficient” prescreening practice, and 40.1% cited it as the “least effective/efficient.”) This, however, is not a big surprise, for despite not being the best indicator of new-hire success, most companies must review applicant resumes/cover letters as part of their hiring process. Still and all, it’s a reminder that centers should focus much more on phone and email/chat “presence” when determining who makes it to the later, more involved (and expensive) stages of the hiring process. (Live phone screenings were cited as the “most effective/efficient” prescreening tool by 60.1% of respondents.)

The Assessment Phase

- The most common tool used to assess applicants who make it past the prescreening phase is a traditional one: interviews with managers and supervisors (93.8%). Other assessment tools used — though not very extensively — at respondents centers include: PC or Web-based skills/knowledge assessment tools/software (39.7%); interviews with senior/experienced agents (35.6%); written (manual) skills/knowledge assessment tests (27.3%); PC or Web-based attitude/motivation assessment tools/software (20.6%); job simulations via live role-plays (14.4%); written (manual) attitude/motivation assessment tests (13.4%); and job simulation software (11.9%).

The above findings are cause for some concern; while live interviews are certainly necessary, studies have shown and experts agree that the most successful centers have a multihurdle hiring process in place where a variety of tools are used to help determine skills, motivation and job fit. The fact that a minority of respondents are using today’s more advanced tools and practices points to room for improvement.

- Half (49%) of respondents indicated that their center uses some type of job preview tool/approach (such as a video of agents at work, a detailed tour of the call center, and/or job simulation software to help give agent candidates a clear picture of what life in the call center — and, specifically, the agent job itself — is really like.

More centers would do themselves a great favor by utilizing formal job previews. Experts have found that comprehensive job previews enable candidates to better determine if they would enjoy working in such a fast-paced and dynamic environment. Those who decide that it's not for them can deselect themselves, saving the call center thousands of dollars in further testing and training of somebody who is likely to quit soon after taking the job. As Dr. Ruth Moskowitz, senior consultant with Advantage Hiring, says, "The hiring process has become a two-way exchange of information and a two-way decision-making process. A realistic job preview is used by many organizations to facilitate a healthy exchange between the applicant and the organization. The bottomline result is a better fit between the new employee and the position. Better fit means more job satisfaction, less turnover and drastic reductions in hiring and replacement costs over the long haul."

Top Recruiting and Hiring Challenges

- By far, the biggest recruiting/hiring challenge uncovered in the survey is continuously attracting qualified agent applicants to the call center — cited by 73% of respondents as being "very challenging" or "moderately challenging." Other common challenges listed include: ensuring that candidates truly understand the nature of the agent position prior to accepting the job (30.6%); finding time and/or resources to effectively prescreen job applicants (28.6%); getting good results from newspaper/print help wanted ads (26.5%); and accurately measuring how successful each recruiting method is (25%). Only 17.3% of respondents indicated that securing adequate budget to support the center's recruiting/hiring needs was a considerable challenge — evidence that more organizations now realize the critical role the call center plays in driving lasting customer satisfaction and enterprisewide success.

- The top five recruiting and hiring changes/improvements respondents plans to make in their call centers within the next year are:

1. More effectively measure (or start measuring) the success rate of each recruiting method (35.9%)
2. Improve (or start using) ideal agent profiles to help in recruiting and assessing candidates (30.9%)
3. Increase the number of quality applicant referrals received from existing agents (26.5%)
4. Dedicate more time and/or resources to pre-screening job applicants (26.5%)
5. Improve (or start using) attitude/motivation assessment tests/tools (24.9%)

Not only are most centers not currently using email screenings (as mentioned earlier) to help assess potential e-support agents, few (7.2%) have plans to start doing so within the next year. Even fewer (4.4%) have plans to tap the power of IVR technology in the near future to help screen agent applicants — an approach that, as previously mentioned, can help save time and effort in evaluating job candidates.

Conclusion

Today's call centers appear to be doing a lot of things right with regard to recruiting and hiring qualified agents; however, many have yet to implement and embrace some of the more advanced and progressive methods that can help launch the center's frontline to the next echelon of customer support.

While many centers use a healthy variety of recruiting methods to attract candidates (though are not doing a great job of accurately measuring recruiting success), few are doing all they can to effectively prescreen applicants and assess them thoroughly in the latter hiring stages. Yes, most have the basics down, but could greatly enhance their hiring programs by taking advantage of more strategic recruiting approaches and robust tools/software designed to help assess candidates' ability — and desire — to succeed in the dynamic call center environment.

Among the specific things that many centers would be wise to do in regard to their hiring programs include: targeting less traditional yet very viable labor pools such as mature workers and workers with disabil-

ities; offering a telework option to help extend the recruiting reach and attract “cream of the crop” candidates; using more comprehensive and realistic job previews; investing in dynamic IVR-based prescreening solutions; tapping job simulation software and automated skills assessment tools to help gauge potential agents’ customer contact ability and knowledge; using tests and tools specifically designed for determining whether agent candidates have the right psychological attributes and motivation for call center work; focus-

ing more strongly on e-support skills (email/chat) when screening and assessing agent candidates.

It is evident that call center professionals realize what it takes to create and sustain a powerful hiring program, and that most organizations recognize the importance of and fully support the center’s mission; now the centers themselves must utilize more progressive tactics to attract the kind of people who have the ability to dazzle customers and the drive to do so for years to come. ■



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The Contact Center Agent of the Future: How Call Centers and Agents’ Jobs Are Changing

Call center jobs are evolving due to shifts in the business environment, and the traditional agent success profile is becoming obsolete.

Globalization. Rapid changes in technology. Business mergers and acquisitions. Flatter organizations. Increasingly complex products. More demanding customers. These and other business trends are changing the very nature of the work agents will do — and the skills they will need — as the future unfolds. Agent work is evolving as it adjusts to:

CONTINUOUS CHANGE

Unlike the past, where call center work was marked by structure and routine, the defining characteristic of work in future centers will be continuous change.

Does this example from the insurance industry sound familiar? A call center services its company’s simple term insurance product line. A competitor acquires the company and adds new life insurance and annuity products to the mix. The agent workforce is downsized 30 percent and those who remain must support the entire product line and use the acquiring compa-

ny’s legacy system. Then the company merges with yet another financial services company. The center’s workforce is not reduced this time, but now the agents must also service disability and long-term care insurance. This means more products to learn and new types of consumers to support. Now that’s continuous change!

Knowledge — whether of a product, service, procedure or system — will have a shorter and shorter shelf life in the future. The ability and motivation to learn new information quickly — not specific knowledge itself — is what will be prized. If an agent finds it hard to learn or is unmotivated, then a performance problem will occur.

MORE COMPLEX PRODUCTS

Call centers historically handled simple transactions or products. In the past, people called to get telephone area codes, make flight reservations, set up magazine subscriptions and so on. Complex products and services were handled face-to-face in business offices

How Contact Centers and Agents' Jobs Are Changing

CONCEPT OF "JOB" WILL CHANGE TO CONCEPT OF "WORK"

- Less boundaries and content specifics
- Transferable skills
- Speed and urgency
- Collaborative and cooperative
- Work aligned with revenue
- Less human involvement
- Highly talented reps are left!

ACTIVITIES THAT WILL CHANGE MOST

- Deal with nonroutine inquiries, exceptions to the rule
- Focus only on high value activities
- Complex activities that require special expertise
- Revenue generation
- Multichannel communication (less phone work)
- Tasks with teams

NEW COMPETENCY MODEL FOR SUCCESS

- Ability to learn quickly
- Understand and perform whole processes, not singular tasks
- Problem solving (reactive)
- Creative (proactive)
- Adaptability with change
- Selling skills (must overcome objections)
- Analytic reading and comprehensive writing for email
- Emotional intelligence (understand one's emotions and others')
- Team orientation with department, across departments, and business partners

and in stores. This business is now being moved to call centers. Agents are helping consumers make car collision claims, create and buy customized personal computers, book entire vacations and trade stocks. Greater learning demands are being placed on agents every day.

INTELLIGENT EQUIPMENT

Intelligent equipment such as voice recognition and "expert systems" (interactive problem-solving programs) will handle and resolve routine problems that agents have historically handled. This new technology will free up the individual agent to handle non-routine, complex, and/or other inquiries that are the exceptions to the rule. They will regularly conduct research or consult specialists in other business units to resolve problems.

REDUCED HUMAN INVOLVEMENT

Intelligent technologies will lead to less need for human involvement. This trend toward automating interactions and implementing self-service technologies is nothing new. ATMs and online banking, self-checkout, and online self-help features are common. Some airlines are even incenting self service by charging travelers who make travel plans through a call center, while offering the same reservations online (where the transaction cost is lower) for free.

The call center agent of the future will handle problems, requests or inquiries that advanced technology cannot address. This trend will create a smaller workforce of agents who have special talents to deal with the most difficult problems or transactions.

REVENUE RESPONSIBILITIES

Economic pressures will force more call centers to justify their operations and change the perception that they are largely an overhead cost. More specifically, companies will want centers to generate a dependable revenue stream that can be added to the financial ledger. This excludes call center programs that "add value," such as gathering and sharing consumer intelligence. These programs do not directly or dependably generate revenue.

This pressure for true revenue generation will impact agent work in several ways. Agent duties in service centers will expand to include successful cross- and upselling activities. There will be accountability and consequences for selling performance. Compensation may include more variable pay based on sales performance.

In addition, centers will have a more economic view of customers. Agents will respond differently to low- and high-value customers. For example, high-value customers will be automatically routed to agents who provide specialized service; low-value customers will be handled by generalists. Agents with different areas of expertise will respond to different customer groups.

FEWER JOB BOUNDARIES

Traditionally, a job is formally viewed as a grouping of positions with similar major duties and work activities. Everyone in "the CSR II job" in a particular center does the same definable things. This traditional definition of a job implies that there are boundaries around a job that distinguish it from other jobs that

have different tasks and duties.

Fast forward to the future. Job boundaries will be less restrictive. Because of the constant change, the lack of routines and unpredictability, agents will perform a wide and ever-changing variety of work activities.

SELF DIRECTION AND AUTONOMY

The movement to flatter organizations will impact agent work. Flattening means fewer layers of management to coordinate and plan operations, as well as fewer supervisors to oversee agents. As a result, there will be less call escalation and agents will be expected to solve more problems themselves. Likewise, agents will make more decisions for themselves, be more responsible for their own work quality, and be self-directed. Agents will have far more autonomy and responsibility than they do now.

INTERACTION WITH OTHER BUSINESS UNITS

In handling more complex products, operating in a flatter structure, and responding to the pressure to generate sales, agents will have a more collaborative relationship with work groups or departments in other parts of the organization. While calling about a bank transaction, a customer may express interest in a home equity loan. The service rep would immediately engage a loan counselor, credit department and underwriting department to close the loan quickly.

MORE INTERNET WORK

Internet technology is everywhere. Because most young people are completely comfortable with virtual environments, reliance on Internet-based communication channels will increase exponentially. In the near future, agent work will comprise less phone interaction and more reading and writing.

What It Means to Your Recruiting and Hiring Process

Your business is changing and so are the skills, abilities, and aptitudes necessary for success in your center. For many of you, the nature of your hiring assessments much change. Yesterday's interview script and

Implementing Strategies to Hire the Agent of the Future

So how will you create a superstar workforce for the future? The good news is that your new assessment strategies should adhere to the best practices already in use today.

1. Build a job competency model based on a rigorous review of work requirements for successful performance.
2. Create a pool of applicants using both personal sources (e.g., employee referrals, internal job postings) and impersonal sources (e.g., company Web sites, help wanted ads, Internet job boards).
3. Gather job-relevant information from applicants using tests and assessment techniques that are reliable, valid and fair.
4. Use assessments that effectively predict success on key performance criteria, including trainability and adaptability, service and sales performance, reading and writing skills, and agent retention.
5. Use multiple assessment tools and techniques. The more information you have about an applicant's qualifications, the better your hiring decision.
6. Give candidates a realistic preview of the job so that they understand what it is like — the good and the bad. This prepares candidates for the job, helps them make better career decisions, and reduces agent turnover.
7. Monitor the effectiveness and fairness of your system.

skills test aren't going to help you hire people who can succeed in tomorrow's center.

The first step to updating your assessment techniques is to review upcoming changes to your business environment. Next analyze their implications on agent work activities, and define the new skills, abilities and personal characteristics those agents will need for future success. Once you've established these new competencies, you can then identify appropriate assessment techniques — and implement those winning assessments into your hiring process. ■

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Recruit Agents with the Right Blend of Attitude and Ability

Basic methods to ensure that candidates truly have the “right stuff.”

One of the most significant challenges facing the contact center industry is attrition among frontline associates. Developing and maintaining a consistent, well-trained workforce is critical to sustaining high-performance levels. This begins with the recruiting process.

Successful contact centers make recruiting a top priority because they rely heavily on the quality of their agents. By conducting a detailed labor market analysis — including researching workforce demographics, unemployment rates, wage levels and information about competing companies who may be pulling from the same applicant pool — organizations can form the foundation for processes that will hire the best associates available. In addition to this initial research, there are several steps contact centers can follow to ensure an efficient, effective recruiting process.

Define Contact Center Goals

An organization can only successfully hire agents and managers after developing a comprehensive strategy that clearly defines its business objectives and contact center goals. By analyzing the specific requirements of each customer group, managers can determine both the specific skill sets agents should have, as well as the hiring techniques recruiters should use.

After goals are established, managers can put together an agent profile with the types of skill sets necessary to meet and exceed objectives. For in-

stance, agents who provide customer care for a cruise line will likely require a completely different skill set and personality type than those agents providing technical support for a consumer electronics client.

A common mistake is to focus this profile on *aptitude* without considering *attitude*. While the ability to learn new skills is absolutely necessary in becoming an effective agent, those who possess the drive to succeed will be better equipped to effectively execute contact center goals.

This may seem like common sense, yet many organizations struggle with their customer service efforts. Why? Because without the right positive attitude, even the most skilled agents will be unable — and unwilling — to effectively help the contact center add business value. They simply go through the proverbial motions, waiting for their next paycheck. Implementing tactics to evaluate candidates' attitudes and behavior patterns will help managers to create an environment of success.

Managers can also begin to develop the right blend of attitude and ability in potential candidates well before the hiring process. For example, some companies work with local colleges to offer free technical classes and other training courses. Students who score high on certification exams are granted interviews for call center positions. Similarly, many contact centers initiate “job shadowing” programs in which local students can observe first-hand what it takes to be a successful agent.

Identifying Candidates with the “Right Stuff”

Managers are sometimes fooled during the hiring process by candidates who appear to have the “right stuff” but who end up not being a good fit for the job. Conducting standard interviews or relying heavily on skills testing often results in selecting agents who put on a good show — those who know how to “pass” an interview, but are only looking for a quick job rather than a long-term opportunity. However, there are several methods to reduce the likelihood of hiring the wrong candidates.

- Incorporating detailed *behavioral* questionnaires and interviews into the hiring process can help managers to evaluate a candidate’s strengths beyond what is listed on his or her resume.
- Conducting phone interviews in addition to in-person interviews is beneficial in determining whether or not a candidate’s positive attitude will be reflected during a phone call.
- Ensuring that candidates are required to return to the contact center multiple times during the hiring process will help to determine their desire to be

employed by the company.

Using a combination of skills tests, behavioral interviews and realistic job previews yields the best results. It provides an opportunity for managers to triangulate results, gaining a 360-degree profile of candidates, which helps to identify candidates with enthusiasm and skills. More importantly, these methods should help contact centers find agents who are driving toward long-term success.

Recruiting Is a Core Competency

Contact center attrition leads to lower overall quality of service, dooming customer satisfaction and loyalty and damaging the organization’s reputation. By evaluating an applicant’s skill set and attitude, as well as deploying creative strategies for determining a candidate’s capacity for long-term success as an agent, contact centers can avoid the by-products of increased agent attrition. Treating the recruiting process as a core competency is a necessary first step toward meeting and exceeding contact center and organization-wide goals. ■



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Generation-Specific Recruiting: How to Attract Various Age Groups

Understanding how different generations view their work and careers can help you to focus your recruiting efforts.

It has never been more important to consider the age mix in your call center. On one end of the spectrum, the workforce is aging; on the other end, more and more young people are participating in the workforce. “We have more age diversity in the workplace now than ever before, and that’s going to increase over the next five to 10 years,” says Bruce Tulgan, founder of RainmakerThinking and author of *Recruiting the Workforce of the Future*.

What are the specific characteristics

of each generation that will make them an asset to your call center? What types of positions best suit which age groups? Read on to find out about the work-related traits of each generational group, as well as ideas on how to attract and retain employees of all ages.

Generation Y (Born 1978-1986)

Generation Y employees make up roughly 15 percent of today’s workforce.

WHAT THEY'RE LIKE

The choice-consequence linear process — where you need to do something to get to something else — is a foreign concept to Gen-Yers. “Generation Y thinks more like a DVD player; they want to go to a pull-down menu and go directly where they want,” says Eric Chester, founder of Generation Why.com and author of *Employing Generation Why*. “They want to get to the reward without going through the effort.” This doesn’t mean that Gen-Yers are averse to work; they simply want to find ways to get to the result faster and more efficiently.

What this youthful group lacks in experience, they make up for in guts. Says Chester, “They say, ‘I may not have the training or the education, but I can figure it out real fast.’” And because they’re creative thinkers and problem-solvers, not to mention masters of technology, they’re probably right.

WHY YOU WANT THEM

Members of this multitasking generation can work with email, chat and phone — all at the same time, without batting an eyelid. They inherently understand the need for speed, customization and interactivity. According to Tulgan, Yers are much more poised to be team players than the more independent Xers and Boomers.

WHERE THEY FIT IN

Generation Y is a very image-driven generation, says Chester. Cutting-edge work especially attracts this group, so putting them in positions where they can work with the latest technological advances can keep them happy.

These workers make great multitasking agents. “They’re the ones who can talk on the phone, surf the Web, push pages to customers, have two or three live chat conversations going on, and it’s not going to cause them to skip a beat,” says Anne Ivey, VP, relationship manager, call center practice for Omega Performance Corp.

Another area where Ivey sees a good fit is as marketing-driven outbound calling agents. “It’s going to be fast,” she says. “There will be one campaign this week and another next week. The Gen-Yers will feel stimulated and will likely be challenged in their job.”

HOW TO ATTRACT THEM

This generation wants to give and receive information through technology, so message boards, online search engines, and employment kiosks are the best way to attract these tech-savvy workers. “They don’t want to have the two-hour, sit-down, face-to-face interview,” says Ivey.

“[Yers] are looking for work that has meaning and value — something that is beneficial to someone else, so that in addition to a paycheck they get good feelings,” says Chester. That’s why Tulgan suggests using the following message to attract this youngest generation of employees: “Be a superstar on a winning team. Work hard to make a difference for our customers and we’ll treat you like a professional.”

HOW TO KEEP THEM

This young group likes change. “Anything you can do to vary the task, so they’re not doing the same thing over and over and over for long periods of time, would be good,” says Chester. “Ask yourself if there’s some rotation or variety you can offer. Do the employees have to stay in one location for eight hours, or might there be some change?”

The younger the employee, the more they want day-to-day feedback (or even hour-by-hour) so that they know their work is paying off. Even better, send that feedback via technology.

Gen-Yers also want to be trained through technology. “If they have 15 minutes of downtime, they’re going to want to go online, grab an e-learning module, read the module during the 15 minutes, and get back onto chat or the phone,” says Ivey. “They want to be in control of their learning.”

Generation X (Born 1965-1977)

Gen-Xers comprise approximately 30 percent of today’s workforce.

WHAT THEY'RE LIKE

When they reached employment age, Gen-Xers entered a recession-era workforce that neither wanted nor needed them. It’s no wonder that they learned that they could rely only on themselves. They’re “on” 24/7 with pagers, cell phones and email; as a result, burnout is a common problem among Gen-Xers.

WHY YOU WANT THEM

Contrary to the slacker stereotype, Gen-Xers are hard workers when properly motivated; in fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, they work 3.6 percent more hours per week than the national average. This group has grown into independent, entrepreneurial thinkers who can easily digest information and are skilled with technology.

WHERE THEY FIT IN

Ivey believes Gen-Xers fit best into leadership roles, such as team leaders or managers. They also work well as agents in a service or sales role, but, says Ivey, “There needs to be a promise that this is just to get their feet wet, and that they’ll move up the ladder quickly.” In fact, in a study by the Towers Group, career advancement was cited by 51 percent of Gen-Xers as a reason to stay at a company (vs. 36 percent for Baby Boomers).

HOW TO ATTRACT THEM

Unlike Gen Y, Xers value the face-to-face interview. During the interview, they want to be given a clear picture of a day in the life of someone in the position for which they’re applying. “The best way to recruit Gen-Xers is to have them come in and spend a day with a couple of different agents in different roles,” says Ivey.

Whereas Baby Boomers want to know how their role will help the company, Gen-Xers want to know how their work will help their own careers. “You need to be able to show them a specific career path with specific milestones for advancement,” says Ivey.

As for recruiting, “Gen-Xers respond best to leaders and managers who spend time coaching, clarifying the day-to-day bargain at work and giving credit for results achieved,” says Tulgan. That’s why he suggests this message to attract this group to your workforce: “Here’s the deal: If you get lots of work done very well every day, we’ll pay you more and give you more control over your schedule.”

HOW TO KEEP THEM

Because Gen-Xers are wary of promises of stability and long-term employment, they need to be managed on a short-term basis. “You need to tell them, ‘Here’s what I need from you today, tomorrow, next week,’” says Tulgan. They tend to want more control over

their schedules, exposure to decision-makers, and more responsibility and training opportunities.

Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)

Baby Boomers are roughly 45 percent of today’s workforce.

WHAT THEY’RE LIKE

During the recession, Boomers watched as their job loyalty was rewarded with layoffs. Like Generation Xers, Boomers have fallen into a “free agency” mindset, knowing that they can rely only on themselves in the world of work (for more information on this topic, read “Dealing with the Free Agent Mindset: Rethink Recruiting and Rewards,” *CCMReview*, December 2000).

WHY YOU WANT THEM

Baby Boomers are independent thinkers who take a tremendous amount of responsibility for their own success and work well in a “sink or swim” environment. According to Tulgan, Boomers tend to be competitive and eager to prove themselves. Most of them are very experienced employees and are not as high-maintenance as younger workers.

WHERE THEY FIT IN

Boomers fit well in a quality assurance role, such as call monitoring. “They have great life experience,” says Ivey. “They’ve seen a lot of things, they’ve been in the public sector, they’ve probably been in service and sales before, and they can ensure that a consistency is carried out through the monitoring process.”

Because of Boomers’ work experience, they’re also good in training positions. “These seasoned professionals can handle best practices and stories about better ways to handle a situation,” says Ivey.

Specialty positions in the call center can also be successfully filled by Boomers. “If you have a call center that deals with mortgages or business banking or insurance, Boomers will do particularly well in these positions because of their life cycle,” says Ivey. “They’ve owned a house, they may have owned a business, they’ve bought insurance.”

HOW TO ATTRACT THEM

Although the telephone interview is important,

“This generation will value a face-to-face interview more,” says Ivey. “They want to come in and talk to you about how they can help the company become a better organization.” To attract this group, she suggests using headhunters, newspaper ads and other traditional recruiting methods.

Tulgan recommends attracting Baby Boomers with this message: “Welcome to the inner circle. We want to put your skills, experience and wisdom to work for our customers and clients.”

HOW TO KEEP THEM

Boomers tend to respond best to leaders who listen attentively to their input, include them in decision-making and challenge them to keep growing. “They want to be included in the inner circle,” says Tulgan.

Boomers also want to know that their contributions are making a difference to the company. “They’re going to want to hear how the company is doing,” says Ivey. “They want to see the financials, to see that their company is ranking at the top in the polls, and they want to celebrate with the company.” Sharing this with your Boomer workers will make them feel more valued and loyal to the company.

The Silent Generation (Born before 1946)

The Silent Generation makes up about 10 percent of today’s workforce.

WHAT THEY’RE LIKE

Silents often wonder what happened to the workplace commitment, loyalty and honest work ethic they inherited. They have no patience for job hoppers and for those who would bypass the traditional corporate ladder. Silents are also good mediators who take others’ opinions into account.

WHY YOU WANT THEM

Workers of the Silent Generation are the employees with the most wisdom, knowledge and experience. They tend to have a strong, traditional work ethic.

“Because of their more traditional work ethic, they tend to be easier to manage on a day-to-day basis,” says Tulgan. “Every day is not a negotiation.”

WHERE THEY FIT IN

According to Ivey, peak time positions suit Silents well. Silents can be averse to change, so with a peak time position, their schedules will be fairly consistent. Also, in a generation where chit-chat and exchanging pleasantries are de rigueur, the rushed, timed calls in some centers can be a turnoff. On the other hand, service roles fit this generation’s need to have interpersonal communication.

HOW TO ATTRACT THEM

As with Baby Boomers, traditional recruiting practices and face-to-face interviews are important to this group. To attract this generation of workers to your call center, Tulgan suggests this recruiting message: “Welcome to the family. Give us your best every day and we’ll do our best to take care of you.”

HOW TO KEEP THEM

Older workers are often looking for flexibility. “If you can’t retain them full-time on site, it may be good to work out some kind of flexible arrangement,” says Tulgan. “Maybe you can use them as part-timers, working around their schedules and their needs.”

Silents also appreciate concrete rules and operating procedures. “If there are exceptions to rules, spelling out the exceptions is every bit as important as spelling out the rules,” says Tulgan.

Who Makes the Best Agents?

Obviously, there are advantages to having agents of each generational group working in your call center. The right age mix will depend on the specific positions and functions agent perform, as well as growth opportunities and the overall culture. ■

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The Often-Ignored Art of Supervisor Selection

An inadequate selection process for this critical role can have a highly negative impact on both the call center and organization.

Many call centers have implemented a comprehensive, multi-hurdle hiring process featuring advanced screening and assessment tools to ensure that they attract and acquire the best agents possible. Few centers, however, have done the same to ensure that they have the best supervisors leading those agents.

Supervisors, while positively paramount to the performance and development of their staff, rarely are put through a serious selection process in attaining their positions. More often than not, supervisors rise from the agent ranks as stellar, ambitious frontline performers. However, as many call centers — and staff — soon discover, not all who can *do* can *teach*.

An inadequate or non-existent supervisor selection process can have severely negative effects on the call center and enterprise as a whole, says Anne Nickerson, president of training and consulting firm Call Center Coach and author of *Not by the Seat of My Pants: Leadership Lessons for the Call Center Supervisor*.

“Not enough attention is given to supervisor assessment and hiring. I think supervisors are the most critical part of success in the call center. Managers often erroneously assume that, if an agent is doing a terrific job with customers, they automatically will be good at supervising. Unfortunately, these assumptions can be the demise of an organization.”

Matt Harles, vice president of sales for PhoneWare — a San Diego-based

service agency specializing in both inbound and outbound customer care — fully concurs. He, like Nickerson, sees supervisors as the unsung heroes of the call center — the glue that holds the center together, but who typically take a back seat to frontline staff.

“One piece tends to be forgotten in the development of call center performance,” says Harles. “This is the element that ensures results, keeps the agents happy, and orchestrates performance: the call center supervisor.”

And with so much of a call center's success hinging on how supervisors perform, it only makes sense, Harles says, to dedicate ample time and effort to the selection and mentoring of these individuals.

Groom, Baby!

In top-performing call centers, the supervisor selection process usually starts long before an actual supervisory position opens up. Some centers, for example, offer training opportunities for aspiring supervisors — often as part of a formal career path. This training may take the form of classroom instruction, self-paced e-learning modules, or job-shadowing (where experienced agents take time off the phones to work closely with a supervisor).

The best programs use a combination of all these elements, says Nickerson, but emphasize the “practical” over the “didactical.” Skills, she says, should be addressed “at a minimum, with courses and classroom training, but most importantly via on-the-job

application with a mentor for support.”

Key topics to be covered/experienced when training potential supervisors, according to Nickerson and other experts, include: forecasting/scheduling; quality and metrics reporting; project management; recruiting, screening and hiring; priority setting; call center technologies; monitoring; providing effective feedback and coaching; team building; motivation; conflict management; and managing diversity.

“There are other basic leadership skills that are not necessarily trainable,” she adds “but that can be observed, such as ethics, integrity, honesty, trustworthiness and problem-solving skills — all of which are critical to success.”

Supervising is both a science and an art, a tremendous challenge, and a great opportunity to positively impact others.

Some call centers, while without a formal training program or career path for supervisor candidates, involve seasoned agents in key projects and initiatives that enable them to learn and to hone important supervisory skills. Examples include letting veteran staff serve as peer mentors, training assistants, quality monitoring associates, or interdepartmental interns/liaisons (who work closely with — and sometimes even work in — other departments within the enterprise.)

The latter, says Nickerson, is a great way for aspiring supervisors to learn the ins-and-outs of the organization and to embrace the critical role that the call center plays in it.

“The best example I’ve ever seen is an organization that required future supervisors to spend a minimum of two years as an agent — including a rotation in other support areas such as marketing, billing, fulfillment, sales and the mail room. The different perspectives and experiences made each of their supervisors understand the impact of decisions, as well as [fostered] important inter-departmental relationships that would prove valuable for the future.”

Assessment Tools Help Select the Best

Where grooming agents for future supervisory roles helps them develop key competencies needed in the position, today’s advanced assessment tools help the call center determine who is, indeed, ready to take the reins.

Only recently have such specialized tools for supervisor selection emerged on the market. The most comprehensive solutions blend both automated and face-to-face simulations of realistic supervisory situations, and provide detailed assessments and hiring suggestions for each candidate.

One tool — Employment Technologies’ “Team Leader Readiness Simulation” (TLRS) — even helps hiring managers create cogent and revealing interview questions, evaluate candidates’ responses, and develop customized performance plans for each candidate.

Other supervisor selection tools for call centers are less high-tech, though no less effective. FurstPerson — a leading call center human resources consulting firm — offers its “Supervisor Hiring Assessment” service. As part of this service, FurstPerson experts first conduct a job analysis and validation study to define the specific supervisory job requirements for the client call center. Based on those requirements, they develop detailed job assessments that each supervisory candidate takes. FurstPerson then analyzes the results with the call center client’s managers and makes hiring recommendations.

Though the methods may differ slightly, if you read through the product literature of today’s top supervisor selection tools, you’ll see that they all evaluate the same critical skills and characteristics. Among these are: relationship building; coaching; team building; mental alertness; analytical thinking; decisiveness; time management; leadership ability; ability to motivate; flexibility; work ethic; and job/organization fit.

Nickerson supports the use of reputable selection tools and agrees that they can, indeed, be helpful in determining whether or not a supervisor candidate has the core competencies/qualities listed above, but

she advises managers not to expect or let selection tools do all the work.

“I have great faith in assessments that have been validated against the same job requirements,” she says. “However, they should be used in conjunction with behavioral interviews” and, in the event that the candidate is from outside the organization, “reference-checking, as well.”

New-Hire Training Ain't Just for Agents Anymore

In the best-performing call centers, supervisor selection does not end with supervisor selection. To truly set up the new supe — and the center's agents — for success, these centers put the former through special new-hire training curriculum. Most centers seek input from their existing supervisors when determining the key modules/skills to include in such training. Training typically lasts one to two weeks, and covers topics similar to those covered in training for aspiring supervisors (discussed previously), but usually with a

sharper focus on the specific set of skills that will be used immediately on the job.

While new-hire training for supervisors rarely lasts more than eight to 10 days, supervisor development must be ongoing, says Nickerson. “Continuous training is critical. An ongoing 360-degree feedback process combined with a personal development plan focuses on the specific needs of the individual and the organization.”

When assessing supervisor performance and identifying areas for improvement, Nickerson recommends focusing on three cornerstones: 1) employee satisfaction; 2) customer satisfaction; and 3) business results.

And, she adds, don't forget to reward and recognize supervisors for a job — a very important job — well-done.

“Supervisors are the unsung heroes of the workplace, and often are not given credit, recognition or monetary supplements for all they do. Supervising is both a science and an art, a tremendous challenge, and a great opportunity to positively impact others.” ■

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